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ABSTRACT

In teaching poetry to unenthused students, a teacher began as though the student have never seen a poem they liked. Teachers are advised to keep to free verse whenever possible, and when possible to stay contemporary, especially in the early stages of poetry teaching. Poems that don't need footnotes for clarity can be taught and whatever texts are being used can always be supplemented with interesting poems found in personal reading. Students must always be given some leeway in choosing which poem to discuss in groups or in writing assignments: choices that allow them to make value judgments and express their own interests can be offered. It is most important to start with students' own words and ideas--not someone else's. There are various class activities which have students write something from which poetic form and content can be derived at the start of a discussion of poetry analysis. For example, a teacher can hand out an A to Z list containing all the words of a brief poem, and ask each student to reassemble the words in a free verse form of 10 lines or so in a brief period of time, read them aloud, choose a few, and proceed with the discussion of poetry analysis. Such approaches can also be used in literature-based composition classes and in creative writing classes. (Two handouts providing a list of definitions of poetic terms and a comparison of literary elements of fiction and poetry are attached.) (SR)

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Teaching Poetry to the Unenthused

Among the various phenomena with a "bad reputation" in a literature class, poetry often has the worst. Students commonly groan when I announce the poetry assignments on a syllabus the first day of class, in fact. One of my purposes as a teacher of poetry is to reverse their preconceptions about the value of poetry, and I now do this by having them actually write a poem in class when we begin to study it. Most students have never attempted a poem before, and since doing is usually more fun than just watching, they participate willingly. This begins to help them come to terms with the "strangeness" and "unclearness" of poems, especially free verse poems. "That was when poetry got weird," one student said in class when I talked about the rise of free verse in the 20th century. This remark is a potentially constructive one, despite its negativity. "Weird" things have their peculiar fascination, as many MTV videos have demonstrated. "Weird" is at least not boring, and that can be a starting point for generating the interest you seek.

My background in poetry is different from that of most students. I was actively writing poems from the age of fifteen or so, became a creative writing major as an undergraduate, and took a graduate workshop in poetry writing before turning to a

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more traditional literary major. I intended to get some poems published from day one. Most students probably half suspect that poetry is a plot conceived by English teachers to torture and bore them, though. They haven't looked at reading poetry from the point of view of a writer before, as I had done for a long time. So I try to recreate the situation I was in when poetry became meaningful for me. I have them write something from which we can derive poetic form and content at the start of our discussion of poetry analysis.

The word "analysis" is a problem in and of itself, of course. Analysis is a form of dissection, and biology has already shown them that you only dissect something that's already dead. Rather than starting with analysis, start with synthesis--put together something in a whole, make something alive using words. It's certainly more fun than looking at a wall of words with no apparent relationship to the person compelled to admire them for a class grade.

My first successful class for poetry teaching in a literary context was American Literature II (Spring 1985). Instead of marching through the New Critical canon as I had the previous term, I promoted contemporary poetry in the assignments--although I covered some standards as well. I began poetry discussion with a Kenneth Koch exercise suggested by Wishes, Lies and Dreams, his book on teaching poetry to children: "If I were the Wizard of Oz, I'd . . ." After everyone finished that statement, we compared results and I wrote everyone's sentence on the board.

We got patterns of imagery that tapped into dreamlike whimsy, allusions to the film, and wish fulfillment. That initiated discussion on poetry's use of fantasy to create meaning. When discussing the modern poets I covered (Eliot, Stevens, Williams, Cummings, and Plath), I told students to arrive at an understanding of their techniques and themes, but that they would not be asked to write about a poem already discussed. On the test I gave them short and accessible new poems by these writers, and asked them to choose one and discuss it. This process allowed them to discover something new on a test, instead of merely regurgitating the old. The out of class poetry essay asked them to choose one of six free verse poems from contemporary authors in the anthology, plus a couple more printed on a handout. Towards the end we had a New Yorker poem day, where I brought in xeroxes of poems I'd collected from issues in the last ten years, and we got into groups to discuss the one we found most interesting. We found that the poets shared many of our concerns about relationships and life. One of my students in that class told me later that before one class began, someone actually admitted that "that poetry stuff" wasn't as bad as all that.

This class taught me several things about poetry teaching. Don't assume students know anything about poetry--begin as if they've never seen a poem they've liked. Keep to free verse whenever possible, and when possible stay contemporary--especially in the early stages of poetry teaching. Teach poems

that don't need footnotes for clarity; often the footnotes add extraneous information and occasionally even false interpretation. If one or two words are unclear, define them briefly on the board. Always supplement whatever texts you're using with interesting poems you find in your own reading. Don't just stick to the "standards" by the major writers; look for the ones by majors no one talks about but still have some appeal, or try writers who aren't well known but still have interesting individual poems. Always give students some leeway in choosing which poem to discuss in groups or in writing assignments: offer them choices that allow them to make value judgments and express their own interests. Most important of all, start with their own words and ideas--not some else's. All Humanities classes should tap into the creative potential of students, not just the creative writing courses.

This class also changed the way I taught the literature-based composition classes that followed it. I immediately began using tests as a means of seeing how a student could enter a new poem's unique world and explore it, rather than backtracking over themes already hashed through in class discussion. Most of the information reinforced by a traditional test soon evaporates anyway, but the desire to explore interesting poems might not. A variation on this test is to have students compare a choice of paired poems on the same theme (say, response to a drowning), having them compare poetic elements, "anything else that seems interesting about the poems," and then conclude by deciding which

poem they prefer and why. That asks them to look at a poem as an expression of their own view or sensibility, and encourages them to feel that something in the poem "belongs" to them. The boring repetition of a main point at the end is jettisoned in favor of a survey of class interest. I can quickly see which poems speak to my students, dropping the less popular ones and reusing dependable choices. Of course, poetry analysis isn't and shouldn't be a mere popularity contest, but I do want students to find reading worthwhile, and what I find interesting in an author may not be what they do. In an age of literacy crisis, it's a unique experience for some of them to enjoy reading of any kind. I don't try to turn my students into "good" readers. I want them to be readers period. If they are, good will surely result.

Another class last year allowed me to add something to the methods I've described. Having tired of the groans in mid-semester when we turned from fiction to poetry, I assigned the members of an Introduction to Creative Writing class to do a major research project involving an oral report on a contemporary American poet. (The anthology I used was Poulin's Contemporary American Poetry [Houghton-Mifflin].) Looking at the syllabus the first day, a few students gasped in disbelief, and the first two weeks were a merry-go-round of adds and drops. But when the air cleared, I had a class full of students up to the challenge. The resulting reports two months later made me proud--I heard fellow students of poetry speaking with enthusiasm about writers I had long loved; I also learned about writers I didn't know well. The

experience was exhilarating for us all.

This assignment honed the research skills of my students, though it did call for me to do a lot of library work helping them dig up sources on contemporary writers. I was happy to do so, given the worthy cause. One student toward the end said he still preferred fiction to poetry, but I didn't care--he knew poetry in a way he didn't at the start. This assignment could easily be used in a literature class, even a college freshman class. I was glad I used it, because I felt for the first time that I had shared my interest in poetry with a group of students who had also become peers.

Since students usually come into class liking fiction better than poetry, I developed a handout that showed them the parallels between these two literary genres. Rather than setting, characters, and plot, I suggest to them that poetry develops a scene, places a human element into it, and creates an action or tension through conflicting principles of life. This last element is particularly important, for that is one way you can generate interest in the poems you introduce into class. Find poems that have a lot of dramatic tension, or raise a situation that it's difficult to ignore (an example would be Frost's "Out, Out--"). A poem doesn't have to be complicated to be interesting; it does have to concentrate language and sound into an intensely organized expression of feeling. There is more ambiguity in poetry than fiction as a whole, but that need not be off-putting to students. You should help them understand that

such ambiguity can give them a territory to help do the work of completing the poem based on their own good thinking and imagination. I call ambiguity in poetry a "mystery" that the poet deliberately tries to introduce into life with figurative language. Since our lives are shorn of most of their mystery by our upbringing (as Poe noted in his "Sonnet: To Science"), the poet helps us see that some mystery should indeed remain in life, a mystery that deserves contemplating even if it can't be figured out. I tell them that every good poem should have at least one line that no one can figure out--a line like "Let be be finale of seem"--so that we can endlessly wonder at its hidden beauty. That is the true heart of poetry, not a set list of "terms" that needs to be marched through. True, certain terms are needed to get into the mechanics of how a poet creates meaning, but I minimize them as much as possible; the "Poetic Terms" handout I give them has everything they really need to know to start working with poems.

One method of poetry writing I have developed myself is to take a brief poem out of a collection and have everyone in class rewrite it using the same basic vocabulary as that poem. (I do all writing in class I ask my students to do.) Without identifying the poem, I hand out an A to Z list of the poem's words, and simply ask each student to reassemble the words in a free verse form, usually of no more than ten lines or so, and in a brief period of time. It's all right not to use all the words given, and to substitute others for clearness in a particular

line. Then we read them all aloud. Often the results are comic, sometimes nonsensical, but the activity offers class members a chance to create a "new" work that reflects a different sensibility--their own. After the reading, I ask the class to nominate a few poems that seem especially good, and some of those go onto the board. I tend to steer towards students who sit in the back or show less interest than others. Finally, we analyze those poems for the same criteria that "real" poems are subjected to, and of course we discover that the poems chosen have theme, patterns or imagery, a small world evoked, and so on. As we talk, I praise interesting images and thoughtful impressions that the students have of the poems.

By doing, then, poetry loses some of its arcane mystery (though it shouldn't lose all of that), and students do better when attacking the difficult work ahead.

Poetic Terms

lyric poem--relatively short poem concerned mainly with the speaker's feelings; any poem not primarily narrative (a poem telling a story), satiric (a poem ridiculing its subject), or didactic (a poem teaching a lesson); an elegy is a lyric dealing with death.

dramatic monologue--a lyric poem in which a speaker (an "I") directly addresses a specific implied listener; thus the reader "overhears" part of an imagined conversation.

speaker--the "I" of a poem as distinguished from the poet him or herself; in every poem, the "I" is part of an imaginative creation separate from the reality of the poet's self; broadly speaking, the "I" is part of the poem's imagery.

verse--a poem with set meter and rhyme, or a "traditional" poem; blank verse has a set meter (iambic pentameter) but no set rhyme.

free verse--a poem without a set meter and rhyme; it still retains its own peculiar rhythm, and generally concentrates on vivid imagery.

rhyme--repeated sound in a poem, usually at the end of a line, and hence called end-rhyme: "stone--own"; sometimes end-rhyme may be similar but not exact, and hence is called half-rhyme: "ice--prize"; free verse is unrhymed.

image--a poetic description of an object or thing that can be sensed in the physical world.

pattern of imagery--a poem taking many of its images from the same aspect of the physical world develops a pattern of imagery, one that creates a metaphor and establishes much of the meaning of a poem.

archetypal imagery--imagery that has wider cultural associations than merely with present-day life--such as rings, the moon, walls, monsters, and other cultural universals; most nature imagery is of this type.

metaphor--an image that explicitly stands for something else; the commonest metaphors have become cliches--the setting sun representing death, for instance.

Comparison of Literary Elements of Fiction and Poetry

Poetry	Fiction
I. Scene The small world (or section of world) depicted--anything offering a place that can be assembled out of what poet gives us in images, or out of what we know about poet. Time is understood to be same as when poet wrote poem, unless clearly specified as different.	I. Setting The place, time, and general environment of a story.
II. The Human Element Speaker or narrator of poem. The "I" of poem. NOT the poet speaking but a person invented as part of imagined world of poem. If no "I" is given, narrator is anonymous but still implied.	II. Characters Protagonist in conflict with antagonist, with minor characters offering context.
III. Action The movement in the scene, or the tension created in conflicting principles of life. The tension may not be resolved, only observed. The action may be simply a quick evocation of life, but applies beyond itself by implication.	III. Plot Precipitative incident leads to rising action and climax, resolving conflict.
IV. Meaning A. Tone Dominant feeling about life poet offers. Can shift from line to line, but should allow one feeling to emerge at end. Can be colored by reader's interpretation.	IV. Meaning A. Tone Feeling towards events and characters portrayed.
B. Theme Brief statement about the nature of existence derived from the human element in action and scene of poem.	B. Theme Brief statement about the nature of existence derived from the resolution of conflict between characters.